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SUBJECT: OF TRIBAL SHEIKHS, ISLAMIC ZANIES AND CRUSADER  
CASTLES: AMBASSADOR VISITS KERAK AND MA'AN

REF: 03 AMMAN 06232

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SUMMARY  
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1. (U) The Ambassador visited the governorates of Kerak and Ma'an in a June 23-24 trip that highlighted the regional variety in Jordan's history, economy and topography. The Ambassador met with local officials and inaugurated USAID-funded clinics in and around the hilly city of Kerak, an historic urban area that has produced some of Jordan's more prominent families and is crowned by an imposing Crusader castle, as well as in arid Ma'an which is more infamously known for desert smugglers, rebellious tribesmen, Islamic extremists and, more recently, anti-government violence. Along the way, the peculiarities of Jordan's tribal culture were on display, revealing just how far removed the Western trappings of Amman can be from other parts of the country. End Summary.

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ROAD SHOW  
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2. (U) The Ambassador departed Amman June 23 for a two-day trip to central and southern Jordan. The first day included a visit to one of Jordan's Qualified Industrial Zone factories (reported septel), a lunch hosted by a local politician in the city of Kerak, and an Embassy-sponsored representational dinner in Wadi Musa outside the Petra archeological park. The second day focused on the inauguration of four USAID-refurbished health clinics in the governorates of Ma'an and Kerak.

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KERAK: HILLS, HISTORY AND ONE HUGE CASTLE  
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3. (U) The city of Kerak is located approximately 130 kilometers south of Amman in west central Jordan. Perched on a hilltop roughly 930 meters above sea level amidst rolling terrain, it affords a scenic view of the Dead Sea and Jordan River valley. Kerak has a long history dating back to Old Testament times and was one of the largest urban centers in Jordan when the country was first carved out by the British after World War I. (The city's current populations stands at about 170,000.) It is perhaps best known for the relatively well-preserved ruins of its imposing castle, built by European Crusaders in the first half of the 12th century A.D. and captured by Saladin in 1187, which dominates one's attention as you drive into the city.

4. (U) Commensurate with its history, the city of Kerak and surrounding area has produced some of the most influential families in modern-day Jordan. One of these families, the Tarawneh clan, claims to number almost 30,000 people (including family members in neighboring countries) and is known for producing prominent professionals including university professors, physicians, lawyers and engineers. At a lunch held in a renovated medieval prison just outside the castle, the Ambassador, his party, and local officials were hosted by member of Parliament Atef Tarawneh. Atef's uncle and economics professor, Mohammad Tarawneh, proudly announced that his daughter had graduated number one in her class at the University of Jordan medical school and was studying to become a neurosurgeon.

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MA,AN: INFAMOUS CITY OF THE DESERT  
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5. (U) In contrast to Kerak, the city of Ma'an is situated on a dusty, arid plain approximately 210 kilometers south of Amman. The governorate of the same name is 95% desert and rather sparsely inhabited, though it accounts for 37% of Jordan's area. Ma'an city's reason for being has historically been to serve the pilgrimage route to Mecca and trade. Located on major caravan routes, many of the city's inhabitants made a living transporting goods via camel and selling wares to those traveling on the old Hijaz railroad. Today, many "Ma'anis," known for their independent spirit, still work in transport driving trucks loaded with goods.

Some of these goods are moved in and out of Jordan legally, others are not.

16. (U) Ma'an's long-standing role in regional trade resulted in close ties with Saudi Arabia. Some tribal groups present in Ma'an extend over the Saudi border and intermarriages between Ma'an residents and Saudis were once common, though less so today. Consequently, conservative Wahabi religious doctrine and traditions, absent in most of Jordan, have made limited inroads and contributed to a reactionary Islamic movement in the area which chafes at the perceived onslaught of Western ways. At the governorate's co-educational King Hussein Ben Talal University, for example, ultra-conservatives have repeatedly distributed leaflets directing female students to wear the hijab and condemning men and women who mix with members of the opposite sex (one look at the trendy nightspots in west Amman would probably give them cardiac arrest).

17. (U) Ma'an and the surrounding region is also well-known as being the site of four major riots over the last 15 years. The first, in 1989, resulted in a still unclear number of dead and was publicly portrayed as a consequence of an increase in fuel prices. The last violent clash in November 2002 saw the deployment of the army and security forces to rein in what the government described as a "band of outlaws" headed by fiery Islamic extremist Mohammad Shalabi, better known as Abu Sayyaf (who was ultimately arrested in September 2003) see refTel). Five people, including two policemen, died during the several-day military operation.

18. (U) While poverty and unemployment cannot alone account for the history of violence in Ma'an ) indeed there are poorer governorates in the country ) the GOJ has nonetheless pumped considerable funds into the region since the November 2002 unrest. An increase in the transport of goods into and out of Iraq (both legally and otherwise) through the area since the end of the Iraq war in 2003 has also aided the local economy. Given the city's infamous reputation, PolOff and others traveling with the Ambassador were surprised to see that Ma'an city did not look appreciably different from other urban areas outside Amman. In fact, the newer area of the city appeared quite pleasant in parts with a number of handsome new buildings (including government offices). Outside of town, large cranes and other construction equipment are at work building major new additions to King Hussein University which, when finally completed, will be one of the biggest educational facilities in Jordan. Some have criticized the project as an example of government excess, asserting that the region's relatively small population (less than 5% of Jordanians live in the governorate) will not produce nearly enough students to fill the university.

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POLITICS TRIBAL STYLE  
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19. (U) The Ambassador's trip underscored the different style of politics in more rural, tribal areas. In Amman, for example, government ministers are insulated by the large bureaucracy from rank and file Jordanians and conduct business more or less along Western lines. When these same ministers venture outside the capital to tribal strongholds, however, this sense of detachment dissolves and they are expected to interact promptly and directly with unannounced tribal leaders who may come their way. Minister of Health Darwazeh, for example, was approached numerous times during the health clinic openings by wizened old men in tribal garb who handed him written demands for services and even berated him in raised voices about their complaints. Rather than have these men kept away or pushed back by security personnel, Darwazeh instead politely accepted their petitions (which he then passed on to an aide for undetermined action) and listened to their grievances for a short, but appropriate length of time.

10. (SBU) Jordanian tribal society contains its fair share of family rivalries and jockeying for position. Hosting the U.S. Ambassador can help enhance one's prestige and/or status among tribal peers, leading to numerous invitations from sheikhs to the Embassy Front Office. Within the large Huwaitat tribe (think of Anthony Quinn in "Lawrence of Arabia" leading his Huwaitat tribesmen against the Ottomans in Aqaba), the prominent al-Jazi clan is headed by two sheikhs: Sheikh Sultan al-Jazi and Sheikh Hayel al-Jazi. Rather than issue a joint invitation to the Ambassador, the "dueling sheikhs" have individually invited the Ambassador several times to lunch or dinner with the firm intent of being the first to host him. Not wanting to enflame the apparent rivalry, the Ambassador has politely declined these offers but invited both sheikhs to the large representational dinner on June 23 in Wadi Musa. Sheikh Sultan, however, decided to make one last attempt to better Sheikh Hayel by "taking over" a lunch event on June 24 sponsored by a USAID contracting organization. The Embassy fortunately succeeded in dissuading Sheikh Sultan from trying to hijack the lunch

and, to the surprise of many, Sheikh Sultan and Sheikh Hayel not only both attended the June 23 dinner, but sat across from each other at the same table and engaged in what appeared to be cordial conversation. For one evening, at least, the intra-family competition was put on hold.

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